

Semitic Stereotypes: How Being a Jewish Stereotype, Speaking Jewish English and Being a Negative Character Are Correlated on *South Park* and *Family Guy*

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Introduction

In audio-visual media like cartoons there are two factors creators can manipulate to create an impression: sound and picture. Both provide information about how the creators envision certain characters and social groups. In comedy it is often easier to resort to stereotypes than creating detailed personalities when inventing new characters, especially if the characters' primary function is to make an audience laugh. This article will examine how the American comedy cartoons *South Park* and *Family Guy* construct and present Jewish characters. I will argue that the 'negative' Jewish characters of the shows (Mort Goldman from *Family Guy* and Kyle Schwartz and Sheila Broflovski from *South Park*) are portrayed as Jewish stereotypes while the 'neutral'/'positive' Jewish characters (Gerald and Kyle Broflovski from *South Park* and Max Weinstein from *Family Guy*) are not. The three stereotypical characters also speak a distinct 'Jewish English', which includes using certain phonetic variations typically associated with New York English as well as Yiddish loanwords, and the other characters do not. Based on the analysis presented in this article, I argue that on *South Park* and *Family Guy* there is a correlation between being stereotypically Jewish, speaking a non-standard 'Jewish English' and being a negative character, and this can have serious consequences for real American Jews.

The visual and behavioural Jewish stereotypes in *South Park* and *Family Guy*

One very powerful method of expression in cartoons is the way that the characters are drawn: what type of clothes they wear, what colours they prefer and how their bodies look. Among traditional

stereotypical Jewish physical features in visual media are 'large hook noses, straggly beards and ... side locks' (Lippi-Green 2012, 105), and the Jewish woman is 'rarely as attractive as the non-Jewish woman [and is] garish and gaudy' (Dorinson 2010, 648). These visual stereotypes, among others, are used in both *South Park* and *Family Guy* to varying degrees.

On *South Park*, Sheila Broflovski has a large hook nose, big triangular earrings, a large heap of bright red hair, red eyebrows, red lipstick and multicoloured clothes. She is easily one of the most visually detailed characters and, perhaps purposely, the only overweight mother among the main characters. This is in line with the stereotype of Jewish women being 'gaudy and garish', a feature not shared by the other gentile mothers who are very modest-looking. Her husband, Gerald, wears a kippah and has a large beard, but besides that, he is rather plain-looking and has a small, inconspicuous nose. Their son Kyle Broflovski (KB) only has his frizzy red hair to visually connect him to his Jewish heritage, and this is usually concealed under a big green hat, but his cousin Kyle Schwartz (KS) has brown, frizzy hair, large glasses covering slanting eyes and he wears a bright patterned shirt, making him look much more stereotypical than his cousin and arguably less attractive.

On *Family Guy*, Mort Goldman (MG) also wears large glasses, his front teeth protrude from his closed mouth and he has frizzy red hair like KB as well as a bad posture. His wife, Muriel, looks like she could be his twin sister; she wears identical glasses, has the same eyes and nose and has the same frizzy red hair, even if it is a bit longer. Like Sheila, she wears red lipstick and gold earrings, and she also wears a pearl necklace, arguably to make her look gaudier too. Like the more stereotypical *South Park* characters (Sheila and KS), I argue that they are purposely constructed to look less attractive than the show's white Anglo-Saxons.

Another Jewish character from *Family Guy* named Max Weinstein is incredibly plain-looking, donning a grey suit, regular round glasses and smooth brown hair, and the only visual cue of his Jewishness is his kippah, which he occasionally wears, as in the episode "Family Goy", wherein he counsels the protagonist Griffin family after they have found out that Lois (the mother) has some Jewish ancestry. In this episode, Peter decides to embrace this new identity immediately and puts on a kippah, a large golden star of David as a necklace, a tallit and excessive chest hair, which he absurdly claims 'came with [his] star of David' (Purdum 2009).

By throwing together a few stereotypical visual cues and greeting the family with 'shalom', Peter channels a stereotypical male American Jew whose sole function is to make the audience laugh. This stereotype is seemingly more explicitly religious compared to Mort and Muriel, seeing as he wears a tallit, kippah and star of David, which are all important symbols of the Jewish faith. The show also

uses Orthodox Jewish visual cues like large black hats, big beards and *payot* for minor characters who are typically only there when a Jew is needed for a joke and whose personalities only stretch as far as the stereotypes themselves.

Besides the visual stereotypes, both shows also use traditional stereotypes with regard to behaviour, which include being ‘neurotic, whiny, and feeble’, ‘intellectual, effeminate, rootless, mercantile, submissive, and pathologically different’, as well as having poor health and being unathletic (Tanny 2017, 110, 102, 111, 103). The American Jew in Hollywood films is also depicted as “‘greedy, cowardly, and weak” and ... pushy.’ (Dorinson 2010, 647). The Jewish woman in particular is portrayed as being ‘noisy, pushy, loud ... and vacuous’ (Dorinson 2010, 648), and is typically domineering her gentle, sensible husband (Tanny 2017, 111). I argue that all of these classic stereotypes are used by the creators of *South Park* and *Family Guy* for comedic effect, especially with Sheila, Kyle Schwartz and Mort Goldman, the three main Jewish stereotypes.

Kyle Schwartz is perhaps the most prominent stereotype of the three. In the episode “The Entity”, he complains that his flight was ‘terrible’ because they ‘recycled the air onboard and it really did a number on [his] asthma’ (Parker 2001). Throughout the episode he periodically complains about his poor health and how his body cannot deal with the new Colorado climate making him seem whiny, feeble and complaining. He is also highly mercantile, making 5 million dollars from an investment during the episode. When he discovers that KB tried to bribe Eric Cartman so he would not pick on KS, he is not angry about the deed but rather that KB did not try to bribe him with less, making him seem rather stingy. The creators thus play on the stereotype of the money-loving Jew. He is also highly unathletic. When his cousin throws him a football, he has no idea how to even catch it. This is a stereotype that FG has also used: when Stewie Griffin is sent to a Jewish school he wins a sports trophy simply for being able to properly kick a football (Purdum 2009). All in all, KS’s stereotypical behaviour makes him unable to fit in, and he is socially shunned as a consequence.

Mort Goldman’s behavioural pattern is similar. In the episode “Halloween on Spooner Street”, Mort steals Peter Griffin’s newspaper, and after being chased down he withdraws his limbs into his body like a frightened turtle and will not give up the newspaper (Langford 2010). The act of stealing and then hiding portrays him as both greedy, unfair and cowardly, in line with the stereotypes. As with KS, he is also unathletic and feeble. When he was younger, he made an audition tape for a dating service in which he said, ‘ouch, oh my eyes! Could you please turn down that very bright light? It’s burning my retinas. Ladies, I’m a very desperate man. My name is Mort, and I live with my mother, and I have very low standards. [sneezes] Oh God, there is blood in my mucus!’ (Dimartino 2002). In

that very short clip he is portrayed as whiny, feeble, complaining, somehow effeminate, unattractive and dorky. It seems that the entire arsenal of Jewish stereotypes has been used and the objective is to give the audience an easy target to laugh at.

Finally, Sheila is domineering, pushy, vacuous and loud just like the stereotypical Jewish female. In *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* she starts a war with Canada, even physically pushing away Bill Clinton to assert her power at one point, simply because she will not tolerate bad language (Parker 1999). In season 20, her somehow likeable, non-stereotypical husband Gerald Broflovski spends much of his energy trying to appease her, lest she find out that he has been ‘trolling’ people online for fun. He says to Ike, KB’s brother, ‘you know how bad your mom is; she completely overreacts to everything’ (Parker 2016), thus confirming that even her husband thinks she is annoying, but quietly submits as predicted by Jarrod Tanny.

Neither KB, Weinstein or Gerald embody so many traditional stereotypes as Sheila, Mort and KS do visually and behaviourally. But their aberrance is not limited to just how they look, think and act. There is another very important factor to set them apart from the protagonists of their respective shows: their dialect.

The Jewish dialect

Kyle Schwartz, Mort and to some extent Sheila seem to speak a distinct ‘Jewish English’, and this marks them as different from the shows’ protagonists, including other less stereotypical Jewish characters, who speak with a much more standard dialect. But what exactly is meant by ‘Jewish English’ in this case?

According to David Gold, ‘Jewish English is the collective name for all English lects which are used only by Jews, including those lects which may differ from non-Jewish ones by as little as one feature’ (Gold 1985a, 186). In another paper, he defines it as ‘the collective name for all lects meeting ... three requirements’, which are the following: ‘(1) their chief component is English, (2) they are used by Jews, and (3) each lect is an adequate expression of its users’ Jewish experiences’ (Gold 1985b, 280-281). His definition is somewhat abstract, as (3) apparently depends on someone’s judgment of the ‘adequacy’ of an ‘expression of its users’ Jewish experiences’, thus apparently rendering it subjective whether someone is speaking Jewish English.

Another, more contemporary, definition is provided by Sarah Bunin Benor, a linguist at Hebrew Union College, who argues that ‘[w]hat has been called “Jewish American English” ... is not a uniform linguistic entity spoken by a uniform group of Jews. It is an abstract umbrella term representing the

English-based speech of Jews in America, and it encompasses a great deal of inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation' (Benor 2011, 142). She also notes that '[w]hat has been called "Jewish American English" is more appropriately analyzed as English used in conjunction with a repertoire of distinctive features ... that Jews and others draw from as they construct their identities' (Benor 2011, 152). Though Gold's definition is useful in order to gain a broader understanding of the academic discourse about the subject, this article will primarily rely on Benor's definition and research.

Two very important examples of these 'distinctive features' Benor mentions are the use of the New York accent and using loanwords from Yiddish, and these two factors are the ones most heavily used by the creators of SP and FG to construct the (stereotypical) Jewish dialect. Concordantly, '[m]any of the accent quirks associated with Jewish English are simply a collection of features from the grab-bag of New York City's English' and 'Jews, no matter where they're from, often sound a little bit New York' (Nosowitz 2016). A survey conducted by Benor and her colleagues confirmed the linguistic connection between Jews and New York: 'We asked survey respondents, "Have people said you sound like you're from New York?" Among people who did not grow up in New York, Jews (33%, N = 16,408) were more than twice as likely as non-Jews (15%, N = 4382) to say yes ($p < .001$)' (Benor 2011, 151). As a result, 'Jewishness and New Yorkness are connected in many people's minds' (Benor 2011, 151), and this connection is used by the creators of SP and FG. By making KS and MG speak with a New York-inspired accent, even if none of them are New Yorkers, and Sheila speak with a rather similar East Coast accent (New Jersey), they accentuate the Jewishness of these more stereotypical characters while the other non-stereotypical Jewish characters speak with a more GA-inspired accent. This effect is also achieved by letting the more stereotypical characters use loanwords from Yiddish, which are also part of the 'distinctive linguistic repertoire available to Jews in the United States' (Benor 2011, 142).

To get an overview of the characters' speech patterns, I conducted an auditory analysis of an episode from each series wherein the characters of interest feature: "Burning Down the Bayit" for FG and "The Entity" for SP. I recorded every instance of four features typically associated with the New York dialect, which, incidentally, William Labov also examined decades ago (Søen 1979, 54). They are: the dropping of post-vocalic /r/ (not including linking /r/'s), the raising of [æ], the raising of [ɔ] and th-stopping (substituting a dental fricative for an alveolar stop). The results are illustrated in figure 1 and figure 2 as recorded instances of the features divided by the total instances where the features could possibly be used.

For figure 1 I included the non-Jewish characters Peter, Quagmire, Joe, Lois, Stewie, Chris and Dr. Hartman, who are all prominent characters in the episode. For figure 2 I included both the 2 main characters of interest as well as the Jewish KB and Gerald and the non-Jewish Mr. Garrison, Stan and Cartman, who all feature in the episode. I did this to see if the features were merely conditioned by the environment and not just used by the 3 characters of special interest.

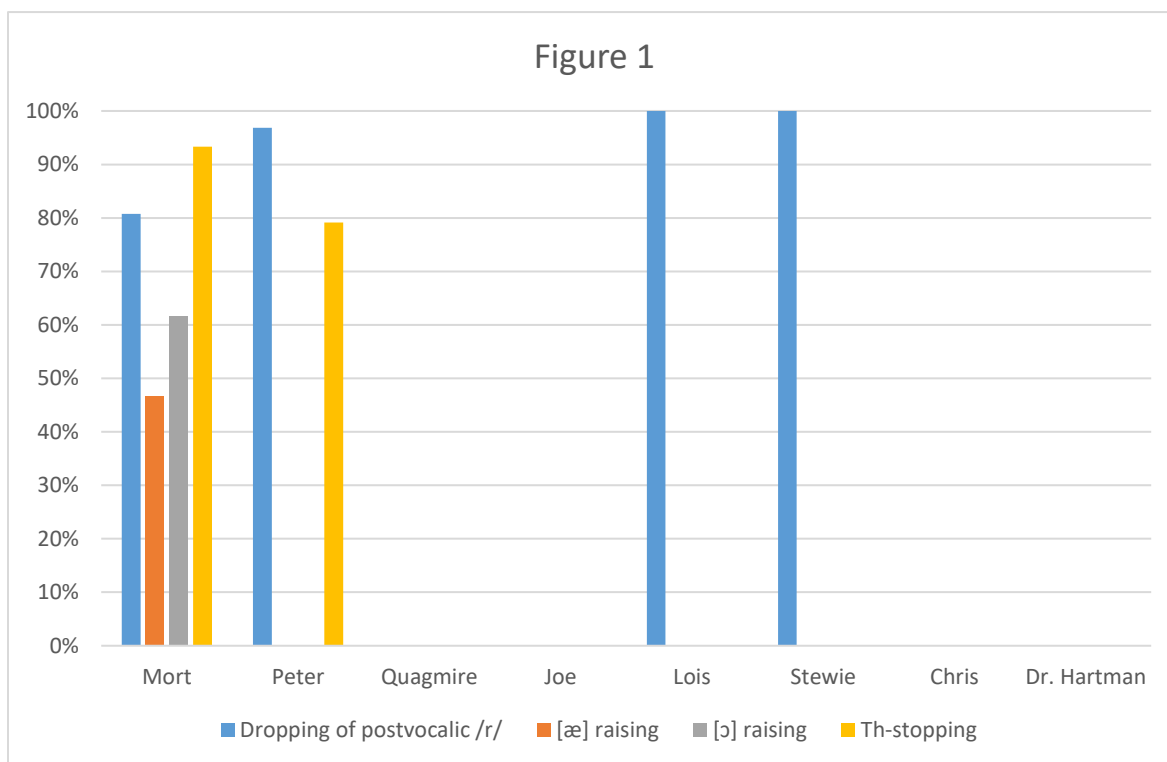


Figure 1: Instances of the four ‘New York features’ divided by the total instances where the features could possibly be used in the FG episode “Burning Down the Bayit”.

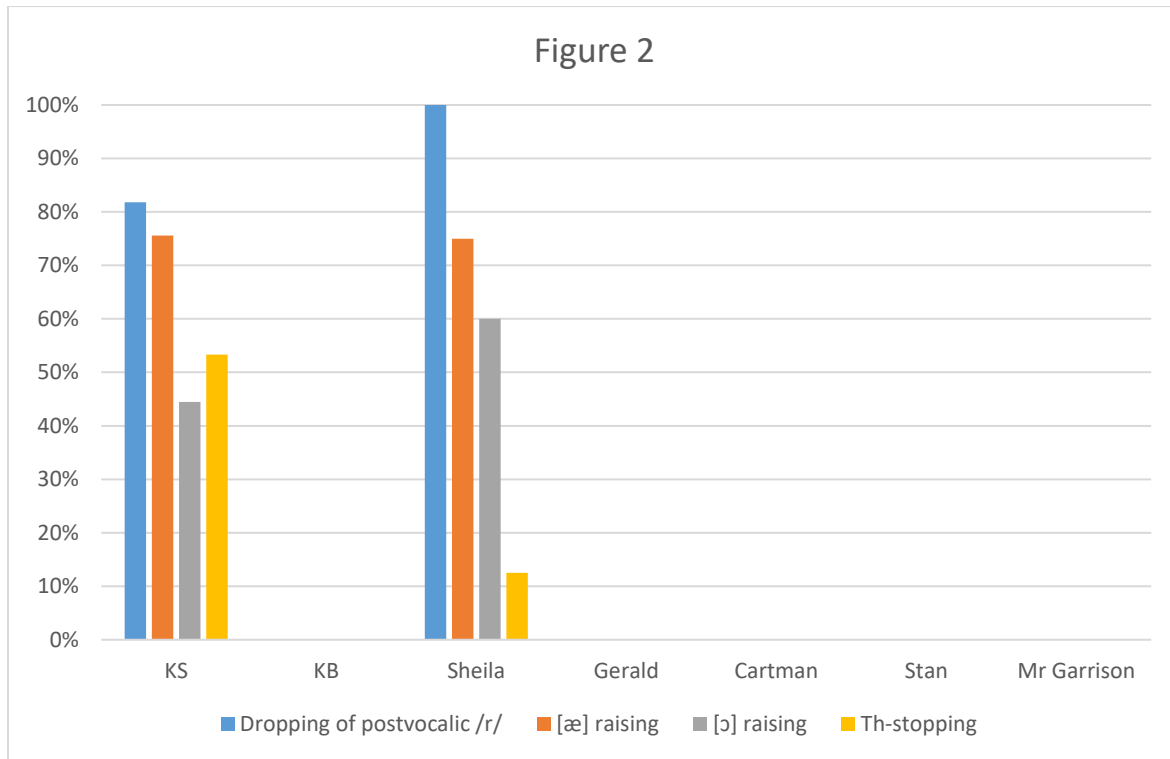


Figure 2: Instances of the four ‘New York features’ divided by the total instances where the features could possibly be used in the SP episode “The Entity”.

It seems that for SP there really is a correlation between being not merely Jewish but more stereotypically Jewish and using these features as KS and Sheila use them, but Gerald and KB never do. In the case of *Family Guy*, Peter Griffin drops even more post-vocalic /r/’s than Mort Goldman and uses th-stopping almost as often, but the use of these features can be attributed to his being from Rhode Island, which can be said to share these features with the classic New York accent due to geographic proximity.

There is, however, also reason to believe that Peter might be speaking more stereotypically than the other characters. Though Joe and Quagmire are his neighbours, which implies that they live in the same environment and interact with roughly the same people, neither of them uses the four features. Neither do Peter’s children Meg (observed in other episodes) and Chris, who grew up in Rhode Island. The last child, Stewie, is a unique case, as he speaks with a somewhat standard British accent, which I would argue is purposely linked with the decision of making him one of the most intelligent characters on the show (see Lippi-Green 2012, 122). There is no logical reason for his having a British accent; it is merely for entertainment purposes.

Importantly, Peter does not make use of the raising of the [æ] and [ɔ], which Mort does. Consequently, Mort's being Jewish is still indicated by his use of these variants and cannot just be explained by his living in Rhode Island like Peter. It should be noted that for some of the control-characters, relatively few lines were said, and it would thus be useful with more data. Even so, I argue that there is a correlation between being more stereotypically Jewish and using these four features, which are typically associated with the New York accent, in line with Benor's theory.

The last non-stereotypical character, Max Weinstein from *Family Guy*, also seems to drop some post-vocalic /r/'s, but he does not make use of the other features, not much different from Lois (Purdum 2009), who grew up as a gentile. He speaks with a much more standard American accent than Mort Goldman, Kyle Schwartz and Sheila, which is not surprising considering that he is not portrayed in a stereotypical way, thus reinforcing the theory that a character must be more stereotypical for the creators to give it a more prominent 'Jewish dialect'.

Although the examined episodes do not demonstrate it, Sheila and Mort tend to use Yiddish loanwords, another strategy used by the creators to reinforce their Jewish identity. In the 1999 movie, Sheila uses the Yiddish word *meshuggeneh* ('strange') (Parker 1999) and often uses the word *bubbele* (term of endearment) when talking to her sons. Additionally, Mort Goldman uses the Yiddish word *schmucks* ('fools') when talking about people who read the real-estate section of newspapers (Langford 2010). I have found no evidence of Gerald, KB and Weinstein ever using similar loanwords, which again would support the theory that the creators only let more stereotypical characters use these markers of Jewish identity. More data is called for, however.

Additionally, it should be noted that although KS is from Connecticut, he does not seem to speak like a person from this state. Comparing him to two real speakers from CT, it is obvious that the features that make his speech stand out are not shared by these speakers (Weinberger 2019a; 2019b). Rather, his speech sounds more New York-inspired, and this is consistent with his Jewish identity, considering Benor's survey which showed that Jews were more than twice as likely as gentiles to sound like they are from New York when they are not. I therefore argue that the creators deliberately made him speak with these NY features to emphasise his identity as a Jew – or rather a Jewish stereotype. Mort's situation is similar; he uses two of the same broad New England features as Peter Griffin, but due to his being stereotypically Jewish, the two extra NY features are also used.

Finally, Sheila's New Jersey accent is so similar to KS's and Mort's that for the average viewer it can easily be processed under the same category. In Colorado, her East Coast accent is seen as clearly different and aberrant, very close to KS's way of speaking, and certainly much closer to his way of

speaking than to her family's. Because she also uses the four features, the East Coast category is seemingly processed as the 'stereotypical Jewish' category, especially because neither KB, nor Gerald, who are non-stereotypical Jews, use these features, but speak a very standard form of American English. Sheila, Mort and KS are the only characters on their respective shows to use all four features, as well as Yiddish loanwords, and the defining factor tying them together is their being Jewish stereotypes. Thereby, dialect and the degree of stereotyping seem to be correlated.

The consequences of correlating being negative, stereotypical and speaking with a non-standard dialect

In some ways it is highly problematic that the Jewish stereotypes Sheila, Mort and Kyle Schwartz are the only ones who speak such a distinct Jewish English dialect, which includes using the four New York features and using Yiddish loanwords, because they are all negative characters. Sheila is pushy, vacuous, loud, annoying and temperamental, exactly like the Hollywood stereotype of a Jewish woman (Dorinson 2010). She was created to be mocked and ridiculed: in the film there is even an entire song dedicated to mocking her titled "Kyle's mom is a bitch" performed by the white Anglo-Saxon fan-favourite Eric Cartman (Parker 1999). Kyle Schwartz is similarly mocked by the protagonist children because he is annoying, complaining, pushy, stingy and dorky. In the same vein, Mort Goldman wanted his late wife to cheat their costumers, he steals from Peter Griffin, hides like a coward when confronted and tries to commit insurance fraud. In short, the three characters are negative characters meant to be laughed at by the audience and used as easy targets for Jew jokes, which is only made easier by their being constructed as Jewish stereotypes.

Kyle Broflovski, Max Weinstein and Gerald are not Jewish stereotypes and they are all either positive or neutral characters, whom the audience is not meant to mock but rather support or at least not mind, and, importantly, they all speak with a more standard American English dialect. Though Gerald 'trolls' people online in season 20, I argue that he is actually portrayed as an anti-hero, who, in a sense, defends free speech and satire, something that SP as a show relies on completely to exist.

By associating a specific way of speaking with specific, negative traits and negative characters, especially when it is based on stereotypes, the creators contribute to the perpetuation of real-life stereotypes about Jews in America who might speak with a similar dialect. A consequence of this is linguistic profiling, which Lippi-Green defines as '[t]he ability to identify an individual's race or ethnicity on the basis of voice alone' (2012), which can easily lead to discrimination. John Baugh

demonstrated how linguistic profiling can hurt minorities in the US when he called a company that gave him different answers to his solicitations depending on the dialect he spoke with (McGarrity 2012).

A study conducted in 1962 using the matched-guise technique showed that non-Jewish Americans consistently rated passages read with a Yiddish accent worse than when it was read with a more standard accent, demonstrating discrimination based on accent (Anisfeld, Bogo, and Lambert 1962). Though this study is rather old, it illustrates stigmatisation of the Jewish dialect in the US, which still seems to be a problem based on, among other things, the findings of this article.

Of course, mocking Jews in audio-visual media is nothing new (Lippi-Green 2012, 103). Generally, non-standard English accents have been denigrated and used for harmful purposes in cartoons and films for decades. Lippi-Green demonstrates that in Disney films, ‘the overall representation of persons with foreign accents is far more negative than that of speakers of U.S. or British English’ (2012, 117). By correlating speaking with a ‘Jewish English’ dialect, being a Jewish stereotype and being a negative character, the creators of *South Park* and *Family Guy*, inadvertently or not, perpetuate a negative image of Jews in the US and make certain linguistic features more stigmatised.

It should also be noted that many children under the age of 18 watch these shows, and if they have no knowledge of actual Jews, it might make them associate actual Jews with these negative, stereotypical traits if these are the only frames of reference they have. Lippi-Green mentions that ‘children [use] racial categories to identify themselves and others in conversation, to include or exclude others from activities, and to “negotiate power in their own social/play networks”’ (2012, 104), and linguistic profiling can be a harmful tool for this categorization.

Now, it is very important to understand that there is nothing inherently bad about raising [æ] and substituting fricatives for stops etc. But when specific features are continually associated with ‘negative speakers’ like Sheila, MG and KS, it can have serious consequences for real people. A very unfortunate consequence of associating a certain way of speaking with negative and stereotypical characters is the loss of variation. A *Vox* interview with linguist Michael Newman of Queens College linked the negative portrayal of New Yorkers in media to intentional accent shift among real New Yorkers as they did not want to be associated with negative media characters (Vox 2016). In a similar manner, the New York-inspired ‘Jewish English’ dialect this article has looked at and its users might suffer the same fate due to negative media portrayal even if it is by something seemingly innocent like a comedic cartoon series.

To conclude, it seems that on *South Park* and *Family Guy* it is only acceptable to be Jewish if one does not perform one's Jewishness, disregarding the visual cue which is passive and non-confrontational. If a character is more stereotypically Jewish, it is a negative character and speaks in a non-standard way with a distinct 'Jewish English' dialect to mark the character as an 'other', which it is okay to mock and ridicule. In short, being a Jewish stereotype is correlated with being a negative character and speaking in a non-standard way on the examined shows.

Conclusion

This article has argued that on *South Park* and *Family Guy* there is a correlation between being a Jewish stereotype, speaking a distinct and somewhat stereotypical 'Jewish English' – which includes using some features typically associated with the New York accent as well as using Yiddish loanwords – and being a negative character. Concordantly, it seems that on the shows it is only acceptable to be Jewish if one looks and acts like a standard white Anglo-Saxon American and speaks standard American English, evidenced by the characters Kyle Broflovski, Gerald Broflovski and Max Weinstein. If a character is more explicitly Jewish, s/he is a stereotype, constructed by the creators using classic Hollywood stereotypes of Jews, and s/he speaks a somewhat stereotypical 'Jewish English' like Kyle Schwartz, Sheila Broflovski and Mort Goldman. This tendency can lead to stigmatisation by tying a certain way of speaking to concrete negative characters and traits in media, which the audience, including children, might then generalise and use as a biased frame of reference for real Jews in America. This stigmatisation can ultimately lead to abandoning one's vernacular as speakers do not wish to be associated with a negative portrayal of their linguistic peers in media. It should be mentioned that this article has mostly focused on phonetic and lexical variation, and more research, for instance focused on prosody and other aspects of language, would be useful for a more in-depth understanding of the topic.

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